**THE EXPOSITION OF HOLY SCRIPTURE BY ALEXANDER MACLAREN**

**PROVERBS-020. A BUNDLE OF PROVERBS by ALEXANDER MACLAREN**

*"22. Understanding is a wellspring of life unto him that hath it: but the instruction of fools is folly. 23. The heart of the wise teacheth his mouth, and addeth learning to his lips. 24. Pleasant words are as an honeycomb, sweet to the soul, and health to the bones. 25. There is a way that seemeth right unto a man, but the end thereof are the ways of death. 26. He that laboureth laboureth for himself; for his mouth craveth it of him. 27. An ungodly man diggeth up evil: and in his lips there is as a burning fire. 28. A froward man soweth strife: and a whisperer separateth chief friends. 29. A violent man enticeth his neighbour, and leadeth him into the way that is not good. 30. He shutteth his eyes to devise froward things: moving his lips he bringeth evil to pass. 31. The hoary head is a crown of glory, if it be found in the way of righteousness. 32. He that is slow to anger is better than the mighty; and he that ruleth his spirit than he that taketh a city. 33. The lot is cast into the lap; but the whole disposing thereof is of the Lord."*

*Proverbs 16:22-33*

A slight thread of connection may be traced in some of the proverbs in this passage. Verse 22, with its praise of Wisdom, introduces one instance of Wisdom's excellence in verse 23, and that again, with its reference to speech, leads on to verse 24 and its commendation of pleasant words. Similarly, verses 27-30 give four pictures of vice, three of them beginning with a man. We may note, too, that, starting with verse 26, every verse till verse 30 refers to some work of the mouth or lips.

The passage begins with one phase of the contrast between Wisdom and Folly, which this book is never weary of emphasising and underscoring. We shall miss the force of its most characteristic teaching unless we keep well in mind that the two opposites of Wisdom and Folly do not refer only or chiefly to intellectual distinctions. The very basis of Wisdom, as this book conceives it, is the fear of the Lord, without which the man of biggest, clearest brain, and most richly stored mind, is, in its judgment, a fool. Such understanding, which apprehends and rightly deals with the deepest fact of life, our relation to God and to His law, is a well-spring of life. The figure speaks still more eloquently to Easterns than to us. In those hot lands the cool spring, bursting through the baked rocks or burning sand, makes the difference between barrenness and fertility, the death of all green things and life. So where true Wisdom is deep in a heart, it will come flashing up into sunshine, and will quicken the seeds of all good as it flows through the deeds. Everything liveth whithersoever the river cometh. Productiveness, refreshment, the beauty of the sparkling wavelets, the music of their ripples against the stones, and all the other blessings and delights of a perpetual fountain, have better things corresponding to them in the life of the man who is wise with the true Wisdom which begins with the fear of God. Just as it is active in the life, so is Folly. But its activity is not blessing and gladdening, but punitive. For all sin automatically works its own chastisement, and the curse of Folly is that, while it corrects, it prevents the fool from profiting by the correction. Since it punishes itself, one might expect that it would cure itself, but experience shows that, while it wields a rod, its subjects receive no correction. That insensibility is the paradox and the Nemesis of Folly.

The Old Testament ethics are remarkable for their solemn sense of the importance of words, and Proverbs shares in that sense to the full. In some aspects, speech is a more perfect self-revelation than act. So the outflow of the fountain in words comes next. Wise heart makes wise speech. That may be looked at in two ways. It may point to the utterance by word as the most precious, and incumbent on its possessor, of all the ways of manifesting Wisdom; or it may point to the only source of real learning,--namely, a wise heart. In the former view, it teaches us our solemn obligation not to hide our light under a bushel, but to speak boldly and lovingly all the truth which God has taught us. A dumb Christian is a monstrosity. We are bound to give voice to our Wisdom. In the other aspect, it reminds us that there is a better way of getting Wisdom than by many books,--namely, by filling our hearts, through communion with God, with His own will. Then, whether we have worldly learning or no, we shall be able to instruct many, and lead them to the light which has shone on us.

There are many kinds of pleasant words, some of which are not like honey, but like poison hid in jam. Insincere compliments, flatteries when rebukes would be fitting, and all the brood of civil conventionalities, are not the words meant here. Truly pleasant ones are those which come from true Wisdom, and may often have a surface of bitterness like the prophet's roll, but have a core of sweetness. It is a great thing to be able to speak necessary and unwelcome truths with lips into which grace is poured. A spoonful of honey catches more flies than a hogshead of vinegar.

Verse 25 has no connection with its context. It teaches two solemn truths, according to the possible double meaning of right. If that word means ethically right, then the saying sets forth the terrible possibility of conscience being wrongly instructed, and sanctioning gross sin. If it means only straight, or level--that is, successful and easy--the saying enforces the not less solemn truth that sin deceives as to its results, and that the path of wrong-doing, which is flowery and smooth at first, grows rapidly thorny, and goes fast downhill, and ends at last in a cul-de-sac, of which death is the only outlet. We are not to trust our own consciences, except as enlightened by God's Word. We are not to listen to sin's lies, but to fix it well in our minds that there is only one way which leads to life and peace, the narrow way of faith and obedience.

The Revised Version's rendering of verse 26 gives the right idea. The appetite, or hunger, of the labourer labours for him (that is, the need of food is the mainspring of work), and it lightens the work to which it impels. So hunger is a blessing. That is true in regard to the body. The manifold material industries of men are, at bottom, prompted by the need to earn something to eat. The craving which drives to such results is a thing to be thankful for. It is better to live where toil is needful to sustain life than in lazy lands where an hour's work will provide food for a week. But the saying reaches to spiritual desires, and anticipates the beatitude on those who hunger and thirst after righteousness. Happy they who feel that craving, and are driven by it to the labour for the bread which comes down from heaven! This is the work of God, that ye believe on Him whom He hath sent.

The next three proverbs (vs. 27-29) give three pictures of different types of bad men. First, we have the worthless man (Rev. Ver.), literally a man of Belial, which last word probably means worthlessness. His work is digging evil; his words are like scorching fire. To dig evil seems to have a wider sense than has digging a pit for others (Ps. 7:15), which is usually taken as a parallel. The man is not merely malicious toward others, but his whole activity goes to further evil. It is the material in which he delights to work. What mistaken spade husbandry it is to spend labour on such a soil! What can it grow but thistles and poisonous plants? His words are as bad as his deeds. No honey drops from his lips, but scorching fire, which burns up not only reputations but tries to consume all that is good. As James says, such a tongue is set on fire of hell. The picture is that of a man bad through and through. But there may be indefinitely close approximations to it, and no man can say, Thus far will I go in evil ways, and no further.

The second picture is of a more specific kind. The froward man here seems to be the same as the slanderer in the next clause. He utters perverse things, and so soweth strife and parts friends. There are people whose mouths are as full of malicious whispers as a sower's basket is of seed, and who have a base delight in flinging them broadcast. Sometimes they do not think of what the harvest will be, but often they chuckle to see it springing in the mistrust and alienation of former friends. A loose tongue often does as much harm as a bitter one, and delight in dwelling on people's faults is not innocent because the tattler did not think of the mischief he was setting agoing.

In verse 29 another type of evil-doer is outlined--the opposite, in some respects, of the preceding. The slanderer works secretly; this mischief-maker goes the plain way to work. He uses physical force or violence. But how does that fit in with enticeth? It may be that the enticement of his victim into a place suitable for robbing or murder is meant, but more probably there is here the same combination of force and craft as in chapter 1:10-14. Criminals have a wicked delight in tempting innocent people to join their gangs. A lawless desperado is a hotbed of infection.

Verse 30 draws a portrait of a bad man. It is a bit of homely physiognomical observation. A man with a trick of closing his eyes has something working in his head; and, if he is one of these types of men, one may be sure that he is brewing mischief. Compressed lips mean concentrated effort, or fixed resolve, or suppressed feeling, and in any of these cases are as a danger signal, warning that the man is at work on some evil deed.

Two sayings follow, which contrast goodness with the evils just described. The if in verse 31 weakens the strong assertion of the proverb. The hoary head is a crown of glory; it is found in the way of righteousness. That is but putting into picturesque form the Old Testament promise of long life to the righteous--a promise which is not repeated in the new dispensation, but which is still often realised. Whom the gods love, die young, is a heathen proverb; but there is a natural tendency in the manner of life which Christianity produces to prolong a man's days. A heart at peace, because stayed on God, passions held well in hand, an avoidance of excesses which eat away strength, do tend to length of life, and the opposites of these do tend to shorten it. How many young men go home from our great cities every year, with their bones full of the iniquities of their youth, to die!

If we are to tread the way of righteousness, and so come to reverence and the silver hair, we must govern ourselves. So the next proverb extols the ruler of his own spirit as more than conquerors, whose triumphs are won in such vulgar fields as battles and sieges, Our sorest fights and our noblest victories are within.

Unless above himself he can

Erect himself, how poor a thing is man!

Verse 31 takes the casting of the lot as one instance of the limitation of all human effort, in all which we can but use the appropriate means, while the whole issue must be left in God's hands. The Jewish law did not enjoin the lot, but its use seems to have been frequent. The proverb presents in the sharpest relief a principle which is true of all our activity. The old proverb-maker knew nothing of chance. To him there were but two real moving forces in the world--man and God. To the one belonged sowing the seed, doing his part, whether casting the lot or toiling at his task. His force was real, but derived and limited. Efforts and attempts are ours; results are God s. We sow; He gives it a body as it pleases Him. Nothing happens by accident. Man's little province is bounded on all sides by God s, and the two touch. There is no neutral territory between, where godless chance rules.